PHE 219.2 W629 c.1

Why Have a Tuberculin Test

WHY HAVE A Tuberculin Test

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HTC-4470 P

Tuberculosis starts with a tiny infection, usually in the lungs. If infection develops into active disease and spreads, it destroys body cells. This process can go on until whole sections of the lungs are made useless. Of course, present day drugs are very effective in halting the spread of tuberculosis, but still it is a serious disease. It can be fatal if allowed to progress unchecked.

The cause of tuberculosis is a microbe called the tubercle bacillus, which can be carried from a sick person to one who is well on the droplets of a cough or sneeze, or on dishes or other things a person with tuberculosis handles. When the bacilli enter the body they cause an infection that may last for many years.

This infection can fool us. It sets in without our knowing it, and in most cases never causes any trouble. But, at any time, often for no apparent reason, and at first without any obvious symptoms, it can begin to grow into active disease.

Tuberculosis infection is not rare — an estimated 40 million Americans have been infected at some time. Fortunately, most of these people never develop the disease. The trouble is that there is no way to tell which of these 40 million people are the ones that will become ill. That is why it is important for the people who are infected to know it, so they can watch out for their own health and so their families and friends can be protected.

The tuberculin test is an easy, simple way to find out whether or not a person is infected with tuberculosis. In this test, a small amount of tuberculin is applied to

an area of the skin on the arm. If there is no reaction when the doctor or nurse "reads" the test in a few days, there has not been any infection. If there is a reaction, the person has picked up a tuberculosis infection at some time, and a chest X-ray is necessary to see whether it has developed into disease.

It is important to remember that only a few of all the people who are infected with tuberculosis ever get the disease in its serious form. Therefore, a reaction to the tuberculin test is not something to be feared but it is a signal to have a chest X-ray.

On the other hand, a tuberculin reaction should not be shrugged off. A person can have active tuberculosis for quite a while and not know it because he has not yet developed obvious symptoms. Taking chances with tuberculosis does not pay. It is better to have a chest X-ray and, if necessary, other tests to find out whether you are well or not. If the disease is diagnosed before it has had a chance to spread the patients will get well a lot faster.

It's important to find tuberculosis in its early stages, not only for your own health but also to protect your family and associates. Those who are not infected should have periodic tuberculin tests to make sure that they have not picked up the infection. Those who already have been infected should have periodic chest X-rays to make sure their infection has not started to progress into disease. These tests only take a few minutes. But finding tuberculosis early may save months or even years of illness.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND
Public Health Service

Tuberculosis Program

OM 1244